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French Foil Turks' Hunt for Terrorist

France's appeasement of terrorists has taken another ugly turn. The French refuse to let Turkish counterterrorist investigators see photographs of the man who has directed the slaughter of Turkish diplomats and their families.

For more than three years, Turkish intelligence officials have been pleading with the French to give them a picture of the No. 1 Armenian terrorist, who uses the nom de guerre "Hagop Hagopian."

The deadliest of the Armenian organizations is ASALA, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia. Its goal is to force the Turkish government to acknowledge what they claim was the 1915 genocide of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks, and to establish an independent Armenian state in eastern Turkey.

ASALA was founded in Beirut in 1975 by the shadowy Hagopian, a Syrian-Armenian with Marxist inclinations.

After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Hagopian fled and set up new bases in Damascus and Athens. He also broke with the Palestine Liberation Organization, which had given ASALA training and support. Hagopian linked up with Abu Nidal, the anti-PLO leader responsible for much anti-American terrorism.

Hagopian has never given a face-to-face interview, and descriptions of him vary. A photo of him would be of enormous value to the Turks, who have been trying to track him down.

The French secret services have obtained photographs of Hagopian. Intelligence sources tell us that a top PLO leader, Salah Khalaf, slipped the French some pictures of Hagopian and other

Armenian terrorists in December 1982, following the ASALA-PLO break.

Using these pictures, the French were able to identify Hagopian when he visited Paris in April 1983. They didn't arrest him, but followed him to all his secret meetings and compiled an extensive file on ASALA.

As we reported, the French cut a deal with ASALA in January 1982, releasing an Armenian leader in return for an end to a series of deadly bombings. The truce was broken in July 1983, by the premature detonation at Orly Airport of a bomb terrorists say was intended to go off aboard a Turkish airliner.

Using the information from their surveillance of Hagopian, the French quickly rounded up 51 people linked to ASALA. One of them, Varadjian Garbidjian, was sentenced to life for murder; he is one of three terrorists whose release has been demanded by those responsible for the recent wave of bombings in Paris.

One theory for the French refusal to give Hagopian's picture to the Turks is that Garbidjian, the Armenian terrorist now in a French prison, may be the elusive Hagopian. A photo of Hagopian would enable the Turks to prove this by comparing it to pictures taken of Garbidjian at his trial.

The Hagopian/Garbidjian theory would explain the wave of Paris bombings. ASALA (with a little help from Abu Nidal) wants its founder released; with the previous deal as precedent, the Armenian terrorists figure they can win Hagopian/Garbidjian's freedom with a series of bombings.